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ABSTRACT

The nations of the Pacific Rim comprise an increasingly important world economic region. Of these countries, Japan is clearly the most powerful and important. While the United States is an important trading partner for Japan, the Japanese are paying increasing attention to the neighboring nations of the Pacific Rim. This digest examines the political and economic factors that influence Japan's relations with its Asian neighbors. The Japanese are in the process of redefining the role their nation plays in world affairs and the role it plays in the Asian regions. It is concluded that, overall, relations between Japan and her Asian neighbors are improving, particularly economic relations. A list of six references is included. This Japan digest is written by an educator for use by teachers to instruct students about Japan and its international relations. The digest is designed to support the upper elementary and secondary school social studies curriculum. (DB)

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Japan's Relations With Its Asian Neighbors

James Becker

The nations bordering on the Pacific Ocean have taken on greater global significance in recent years. (The Pacific Rim countries are China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand. This digest focuses mainly on Japan's relations with its Asian neighbors.) Increased trade, economic development, migration, and energy resource exploration provide evidence of unprecedented growth in many of these countries.

By 1990, the United States trade balance had shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific. While U.S. trade with major west European countries increased during the 70's and 80's, trade with Asia grew much more rapidly. Japan's huge trade surplus with the United States, combined with its closer ties to other Asian export countries such as Singapore and Taiwan, have cut into U.S. markets. Japan's Asian trade now exceeds that with the United States by 25 percent.

In view of Japan's economic power, it is a widely held view in Tokyo and Washington that Japan should assume a greater role in world affairs. Japanese and U.S. government officials, as well as private international affairs experts, believe Japan has the resources to make greater contributions to world peace and security.

Furthermore, given its dependence on international trade, Japan has little choice but to expand its role in world affairs. Nonetheless, continued U.S. and European criticisms of Japan over trade, defense, and lifestyle issues have some Japanese concluding that their true interest lie in Asia.

In Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia, the authors note that an enduring theme in historical encounters between Pacific Asia and western nations has been the West's notion that Asia must be "opened" — made a part of the world community. Scholars seeking to understand and explain these developments have often noted the injustice and arrogance of the West's actions or dwelt on the Asian response to pressure from the West to change. Many Asian leaders, aware that in the past, military force or threats of economic sanctions were used to "open" Asia, resent the pressure exerted on them to accept Western standards. The recent book The Japan That Can Say "No" describes Japanese resentment of pressure to conform to Western standards. These views will play an important role in Japan's efforts to improve and expand its relations with its Asian neighbors.

The increase of Japanese interest in East Asia reflects an attempt to redefine their international identity. With the crumbling of the former Soviet Union and eastern bloc of nations, participation in the Western bloc no longer serves as a key defining factor. Japan has largely completed its effort to catch up with the industrial countries of Europe and North America. Therefore, in this view, the idea of seeking an Asian identity has a powerful attraction.

For some Japanese businesses it seems to offer better prospects in the future than the already developed markets of North America and Europe. South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore have already achieved considerable economic success. A number of countries in Southeast Asia seem to be making rapid progress as well. Other Japanese business leaders seem to be focusing attention on the Sea of Japan area. This region was ignored in the post war and Cold War period as the Pacific Ocean side became the site of the country's new industry. Today, the Korean peninsula, parts of Russia and China, and the northern and western coasts of Japan have the potential to develop into powerful economic zones.

The demise of the Soviet Union suggests an end to threats by Soviet military power in the Far East. Nonetheless, the sudden shifts in international politics has many Japanese wondering whether a new world order will enable the country to continue on an uninterrupted path of economic growth. While welcoming the end of the Cold War and the demise of Communism in most of the world, the Japanese must face the fact that the remnants of the Cold War still persist in much of East Asia. Communist governments are still in power in China, North Korea, and Vietnam, and the issue of Japan's Northern territories — the islands east of Hokkaido, occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II — is still unresolved. The conflict in Cambodia has been settled, at least for the time being, but that country's peace and its freedom and that of its neighbors still needs to be more firmly established.

Even with these concerns, the Japanese are giving more careful attention to East Asia and its economic potential. There is, however, great caution among Japanese political and business leaders as they approach the issue of Japan's place in Asia. Efforts to forge closer ties with other Asian countries must be done in a way that will not create increased tension with the West. The region must avoid becoming a closed economic bloc. Many Japanese leaders, recognizing the global nature of today's economies, believe the best approach would be that of Asia-Pacific cooperation which assumes a role for the United States, Canada, Australia, and other non-Asian countries in the Pacific Rim.

As attractive to the Japanese as is the idea of a new Asian identity, they recognize that their country cannot assume a place as a full-fledged member of the East Asian community without settling past accounts. Japan's responsibility for aggression before and during World War II must be faced. A more basic problem may be that ever since the country increased its international contacts in the middle of the nineteenth century, it has distanced itself from the rest of Asia. Japan has focused its attention mainly on Europe and North America. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a well known nineteenth-century Japanese intellectual

coined the slogan "Out of Asia, into Europe".

As appealing as may be the idea of a great identity with Asia, there are dissenting voices in Japan and elsewhere. Shimichi Kitoaka, professor of political history, Rikkyo University, among others, sees a great danger in the "Asian identity" thinking. He fears it will encourage a revival of the kind of Pan-Asianism that took place in the last 19th century and led to the Pacific War. Fred Ikle, former U.S. Undersecretary of Defense and a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, suggests that to the extent that single regions are critical for Japan's economic well-being, North America and the Middle East are more important than Northern or Southeastern Asia.

Clearly, Japan, like other countries in the post Cold War world, needs new ideas and strategies to guide its future international role. Alliances and agreements must be placed in a context broader than the old military confrontation between East and West. Japan's national interests and its potential contribution to a new world order are not confined to Asia. Nor will its role be determined solely by improving its relations with its Asian neighbors. Nevertheless, resolving its conflicts and achieving improved cooperation and coordination with other countries in the region is an important aspect of Japan's planning for a better future.

Japan's influence in Asia today depends largely on its economic capability. Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuen Yeu, probably reflects the view of most nations in the region when he declares that Japan's role should remain economic and political, not military. Most Japanese seem to agree with such a view. As the world's largest creditor nation and the largest donor of foreign aid, Toyko's financial influence is in evidence throughout Asia, where 63% of its aid was channeled in the past few years. Japan provides China with 70% of all bilateral aid, 75% of South Korea's, and has contributed more than any other government to the Philippines since 1986.

Even more important than government support is Japan's private sector involvement in the region. Japanese companies invested $5.5 billion in 1,700 projects in 1988. In Malaysia, Japanese investment jumped 150% through the first half of 1989.

Economic growth predictions for 10 East Asian nations estimate a combined Gross National Product nearly equal to that of the European Community and 75% of U.S. and Canada by the year 2000. Yet, it is still estimated that Japan will retain its own place in the region with approximately 80% of the economy of East Asia. According to the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, Japanese money may produce the economic cooperation that Southeast Asian politicians are seeking. But they fear possible Japanese domination.

Relations between Japan and the countries of Southeast Asia seem to be improving, particularly economic relations. By contrast, relations with Northeast Asia, including the former Soviet Union, are a diplomatic minefield. China and the two Koreas are very wary of Japan. Bejing has asked Toyko to reconsider the proposed deployment abroad of self-defense forces as part of United Nations peacekeeping operations. South Korea also expressed concerns about the peacekeeping legislation, and a South Korean defense report claims Japan is shifting from a defensive military strategy to an offensive stance. Relations with Russia are still overshadowed by the Northern Territory issue.

Since World War II, Asian nations have harbored strong resentment against Japan for its military aggression in the 1930's and 1940's. This resentment was clear when Japanese historians tried to whitewash school textbook treatment of military strikes or when the Japanese Prime Minister visited Shinto shrines to honor those killed in the war. That resentment still lingers, but it is no longer a compelling factor. Asian entrepreneurs use Japanese financial and technical assistance with little concern of past transgressions.

Recent polls conducted by Japanese newspapers and the Foreign Ministry indicate that in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines and Hong Kong, more than 4 out of 5 citizens believe Japan's role in their country is positive. More than 85% said they welcomed Japanese investment. Only in Thailand did more than 15% express misgivings about the Japanese presence in their country.

Evidence of growing Japanese influence is seen in the popularity of Japanese musical groups in Korea and Hong Kong, and the increasing number of ads in Japanese with Yen price tags in duty free shops in Asian countries. The Prime Minister of Malaysia has not only urged Malaysians to emulate the Japanese, but proposed that Japanese become another official language, along with Malay and English.

Japan has taken a low profile approach in some of the region's more troubled nations. In 1990, it provided $150,000 humanitarian aid to Hanoi after a typhoon devastated a part of Vietnam. Tokyo also pledged increased support to Laos and continues to look with favor on Burma. Japan's Foreign Ministry has also lifted sanctions on North Korea imposed when P'Yong Yang was accused of blowing up a South Korean jetliner in 1988.

Attitudes toward Japan are changing in many Pacific Rim countries. While anything resembling a military buildup in the area could quickly reverse this trend, Japan is unlikely to meet much resistance to its aid, trade, and investments in East Asia. Overall, relations between Japan and her Asian neighbors seems to be improving.

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